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ABSTRACT

Since Kohlberg (1958) first extended the cognitive developmental theory of moral judgment to include moral reasoning in adults, it has been found that women tended to score at a lower developmental stage than did men. Gilligan (1982) has conceptualized women's moral reasoning as being different in kind from men's moral reasoning, with women's development focusing on relationships and the contextual aspects of situations and men's development focusing on competition and achievement. This study attempted to address the issue of gender differences in moral reasoning by investigating or controlling factors that may be contributing to this difference. Questionnaires were mailed to 1,207 households selected randomly from a metropolitan area telephone directory. Male (N=39) and female (N=63) adults completed the surveys by giving written responses to questions about three moral dilemmas with either a male or female protagonist. A relationship between education and age was found such that the lower the age, the higher the education. When just subjects with college educations were compared, a strong trend for lower scores for women was evident on the Kohlberg Moral Maturity Scale when the protagonist in the dilemma was female. Older individuals also tended to score lower. Other results indicated that empathy was not related to the moral reasoning score. Further research is needed to determine the relationships among moral reasoning, gender, sex of the protagonist, education, age, attributions, and empathy. (NB)

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In Search of the Different Voice:

Gender Differences in Adult Moral Reasoning

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Since Kohlberg (1958) first extended the cognitive developmental theory of moral judgment to include moral reasoning in adults it has been found that women tended to score at a lower developmental stage than men (Gilligan, 1982). Although Kohlberg, Colby, et al. (1984) now maintain that such findings have not been consistently found, are due to the older scoring system, or are due to methodological problems in the studies, others have speculated on the meaning of such a difference.

Gilligan (1982) has conceptualized women's moral reasoning as being different in kind from men's moral reasoning, rather than conceiving of women as not having achieved the level of development acquired by men. This perspective of qualitative differences suggests that the process of women's development focuses on relationships and the contextual aspects of situations, while the process of men's development emphasizes competition and achievement. Such processes serve to explain the differential patterns of moral reasoning for men and women. Women view moral conflict with a sense of responsibility to consider all the individuals involved and the impact of a decision upon them. Men, however, tend to approach moral dilemmas in terms of concern for justice and the individual rights of the persons involved in the conflict. Gilligan terms these two differing approaches to moral reasoning as "moral languages." Women speak the language of responsibility whereas men speak the language of rights.

An important aspect of the moral language of women appears to be the ability to share in the feelings of all the participants involved in the conflict. Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) have termed this type of perspective "empathic emotional responsiveness." Perhaps the difference between men and women in moral reasoning can be explained by the construct of empathy.

Others have speculated that the gender difference may be due to the exclusive use of male protagonists in the dilemmas used to assess the stage

of moral reasoning. However, the studies which varied the sex of the protagonist in the dilemmas have all arrived at contradictory results. One study reported no relationship between subject gender and the sex of the protagonist (Garwood, Levine, and Ewing, 1980); another reported that females obtained higher moral reasoning scores when responding to dilemmas containing a female protagonist (Freeman and Giebink, 1979); a third reported that males scored at a lower stage of moral reasoning when judging dilemmas with containing a female protagonist and at a higher stage of moral reasoning when judging dilemmas with a male protagonist (Bussey and Maugham, 1982); and, finally, another reported that both males and females achieved higher moral reasoning scores when responding to dilemmas containing opposite sex main characters (Orchowsky and Jenkins, 1978).

Apparently, some unknown factor is impinging on the subjects approach to the dilemmas and is affecting the level of moral reasoning scored in these studies. However, due to the variety of scoring criteria used and the different samples used in these studies, it is impossible to determine the common mechanism influencing the outcome of this research.

The present study attempted to address the issue of gender differences in moral reasoning by investigating or controlling factors that may be contributing to this difference. These factors included subject population, empathy, sex of the protagonist, and scoring method. First, the subjects were randomly selected from the general population rather than from students or a pre-determined subgroup. Emotional empathy was included to be used as a covariate because it was believed that empathy would be related to the stage attained, and by controlling for the variability due to empathy, gender differences could be explained. Additionally, the sex of the protagonist was varied to determine the factor involved in the previous conflictual findings. Finally, Perry's scoring system for ethical development (1968) was utilized to validate the method.

Method

Subjects

The participants were randomly selected from a metropolitan area telephone directory. Questionnaires were sent out to 1207 households with the stipulations that only one person fill out the questionnaire and that the minimum age requirement was 18. A return rate of 8.5% was obtained, resulting in a sample containing 63 females and 39 males. The mean age was 46 with a range from 18 to 85. The mean level of education was 14 years; the mode consisted of a high school education and the range was from eighth grade to Ph.D. There were no differences between the genders for the demographics.

Measures

Written responses were obtained from each subject to questions about three moral dilemmas (form A) devised by Colby, Kohlberg, et al. (1984). The moral dilemmas were constructed in two forms: with a male protagonist as originally developed and with a female protagonist. The dilemmas consist of a situation characterized by a conflict that must be resolved by the main character in the story. The questions were aimed at determining a person's reasoning for justifying the decision. No response is considered right or wrong, instead the reasons given for choosing one position over the other are scored for developmental stage.

The written answers were scored using the revised scoring manual (Colby, Kohlberg, et al., 1984) by an independent coder blind to the demographics and the hypotheses. Interrater reliability was assessed by a random selection of 10% of the questionnaires and was quite adequate ($r = 0.97$, $p < .01$) with the percent of agreement for the global score as 70% and the percent of agreement for within 1/3 of a stage as 100%.

The written answers obtained to the moral dilemmas were also coded according to Perry's (1968) system of ethical development.

Emotional empathy was assessed with Mehrabian and Epstein's (1972) Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy which consisted of 33 Likert type items. Finally, the subjects were asked to rate on a Likert type scale how believable they thought the dilemmas were.

Results

Table I reports the intercorrelations among all the variables examined in the current study. These results indicate a negative relation between age and education ($r(101) = -.46$, $p < .01$): the lower the age, the higher the education. Education was also negatively correlated with empathy ($r(101) = -.24$, $p < .05$) and the believability of the dilemmas ($r(101) = 0.43$, $p < .01$): the higher the education, the lower the individuals scored in empathy, the lower they rated the believability of the dilemmas. The believability rating was also negatively related to the sex of the protagonist ($r(101) = -.26$, $p < .01$) and empathy ($r(101) = -.20$, $p < .05$): the female protagonist was more believable and individuals with greater empathy rated the believability of the dilemmas higher.

A multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted to determine the effect of sex of the protagonist and subject gender on moral reasoning scores obtained on Kohlberg's Moral Maturity Scale and Perry's Intellectual and Ethical Development Scale with the variance attributable to empathy and education partialed out. The MANCOVA indicated there was an interaction for sex of the protagonist and subject gender ($F = 4.13$, $df = 2/94$, $p < .05$). Examination of the univariate tests indicated the interaction was found only for Kohlberg's Moral Maturity Scale ($F = 5.45$, $df = 1/95$, $p < .05$). No main effect for gender ($F = .83$, NS) or sex of the protagonist ($F = 1.94$, NS) was found. To examine the nature of the interaction, tests of simple effects were performed. These showed that females scored lower on Kohlberg's Moral Maturity Scale when assessing a dilemma with a female protagonist ($F = 5.36$, df 2/94, $p < .01$) while males'

scores did not vary with the sex of the protagonist ($F = 1.61$, NS). Also, females did not score differently than males when a male protagonist was used ($F = 1.14$, NS) while they scored lower than males when a female protagonist was used ($F = 4.54$, $df = 2/94$, $p < .01$; see Figure 1).

Further analysis of the data was conducted to explain the interaction. An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used with believability of the dilemmas as the dependent measure because the believability rating was correlated with the sex of the protagonist. Education was used as a covariate. Thus, the effect of sex of the protagonist and subject gender on the believability rating with education controlled statistically was determined. The results indicated that the dilemmas with the female protagonist were more believable for both male and female subjects ($F = 11.46$, $d = 1/96$, $p < .01$).

Discussion

The relation between education and the Kohlberg score has been consistently found in studies of moral reasoning (Kohlberg, Colby, et al., 1984). When just the subjects with a college education were examined, a strong trend for lower scores for women was evident. This is an important point because most studies of moral reasoning use college educated samples; thus, the finding of lower scores for women may be an artifact of such samples. An interesting additional finding in this study is that older individuals score lower on the Kohlberg Moral Maturity Scale. Kohlberg, Colby, et al. (1984) report a positive relation between age and stage of moral reasoning as it pertains to the entire lifespan and indicate that moral reasoning continues to increase as individuals mature as adults. However, they don't appear to have examined a random sample of adults. A literature search revealed one other study of moral reasoning in a random selection of adults (Bergman, 1983) and similar results with respect to age were found. One might speculate that age is confounded with education in

earlier studies. This is likely because the correlation in this study between age and education indicated that the older an individual in this sample was, the less education he/she was likely to have.

The major hypothesis of this study was that gender differences could be explained through the relation of emotional empathy as assessed by a questionnaire measure to the construct of moral reasoning. If women had greater emotional empathy than men, then empathy could be influencing the score obtained with Kohlberg's system. However, results indicated that empathy was not related to the moral reasoning score.

The interaction of subject gender and sex of the protagonist in this study indicated that men score at the same level of moral reasoning despite the sex of the protagonist while women score at the same level as men with a male protagonist but score at a lower level with a female protagonist. These results are different from the results of the other four studies on the effect of sex of the protagonist. These in turn differed from each other. Obviously, some factor is affecting the moral reasoning score when the sex of the protagonist is changed in the dilemmas, but this factor has yet to be delineated. Despite the current study's purpose of controlling for confounding variables to bring clarity to this problem, it has added to the confusion.

To further delineate the factor involved in the different levels of moral reasoning for women when sex of the protagonist is manipulated, the subject's rating of the believability of the dilemmas was analyzed. Results indicated that the female protagonist was more believable for both genders. How the believability of the female protagonist affects women's scores can be speculated upon. A possibility may be that women identified with the female protagonist and answered the questions accordingly. Although men found the dilemmas with the female protagonist more believable, too, they may be responding with the male perspective. Women

may be better able than men to take the perspective of the other gender and thus score at the same level. Miller (1976) described the relationship of subordinate groups of people (women) with dominant groups (men) by stating "...the dominant group is deprived...of valid knowledge about the subordinates...Subordinates, then, know much more about the dominants than vice versa. They have to. They become highly attuned to dominants, able to predict their reactions..."

Additional support for this speculation is provided by attribution theory: the actor-observor effect demonstrated when "empathy set instructions" are applied. Such instructions ask an individual to perceive herself/himself as another person would or ask the individual to take the role of another person. This set induces observers to explain perceptions in relativistic terms. In other words, individuals explain their own behavior in situational terms and explain others' behavior in terms of characteristics inherent in the person (Fiske and Taylor, 1984). In applying this line of research to the current study, it may be possible to conceptualize the differential response of the genders to the protagonists as due to the inherent characteristics of maleness or femaleness. However, when women respond to these characteristics, they are able to perceive the two different perspectives and, thus, score at different levels.

The limitations of the current study must be considered so that they can be controlled for in future studies. The current research used a questionnaire measure to obtain the moral reasoning score rather than an interview. According to Kohlberg, Colby, et al. (1984) this decreases the reliability of the scores. Additionally, the intention of obtaining a more representative sample of the general population by sending questionnaires to a random selection of subjects, may itself have caused a nonrepresentative sample to be obtained. Self-selection bias may be a factor in the results obtained in this study. However, the current study

is important in pointing out that potential confounds may exist. Researchers in moral reasoning should be acutely aware of the relations explicated above.

In conclusion, clearly, more empirical research is necessary to tease out the relation among moral reasoning, subject gender, sex of the protagonist, education, age, attributions, and empathy. In particular, the attributions an individual makes toward the protagonist in the dilemmas could be explicitly manipulated through directions in an experimental setting. This would help determine if there is a difference between the way men and women perceive the protagonist in the dilemmas. Finally, it is crucial for researchers to be aware of education as a confounding variable and thus, be careful in generalizing from highly educated samples.

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Table I

Correlation Matrix for Total Sample

	Subject Gender	Age	Education	Kohlberg Score	Perry Score	Empathy Score	Believability Rating	Comments
Sex of the Protagonist	-.09	.01	.04	-.20*	-.14	-.04	-.26**	-.05
Subject Gender	----	-.05	.16	.14	.11	-.35**	.09	-.01
Age		----	-.46**	-.26**	-.23*	.10	-.11	-.09
Education			----	.38**	.30**	-.24*	.43**	.21*
Kohlberg Score				----	.46**	.03	.14	.20*
Perry Score					----	-.03	.10	.29**
Empathy Score						----	-.20*	.02
Believability Rating							----	.11

N = 101
* $\alpha < .05$
** $\alpha < .01$

Figure 1

Interaction Between Sex of the Protagonist and Subject Gender